

THE
LONESOMEST
DOLL

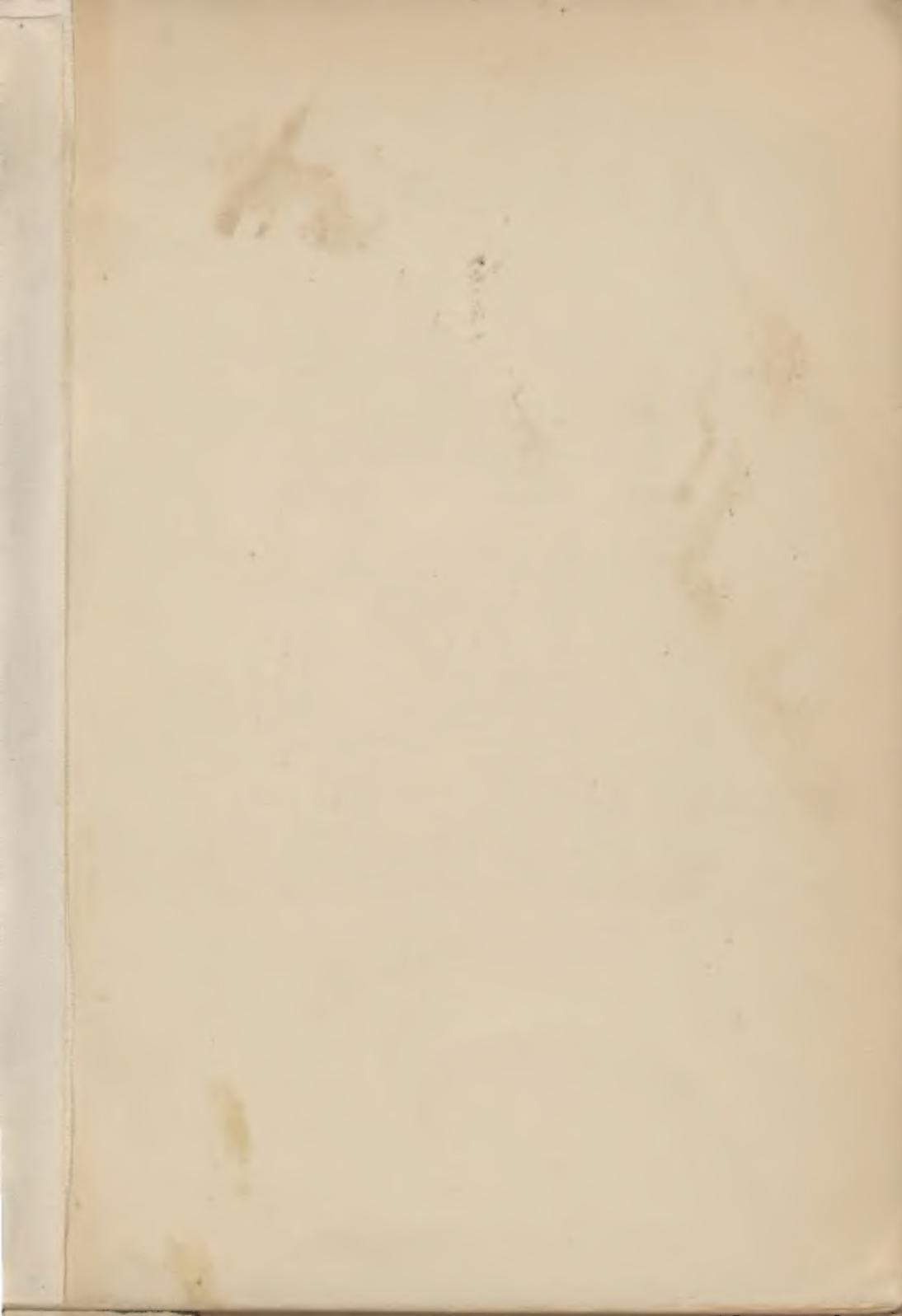
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ILLUSTRATED BY ARTHUR RACKHAM

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THE LONESOMEST DOLL

BY ABBIE FARWELL BROWN



ILLUSTRATED BY
ARTHUR RACKHAM

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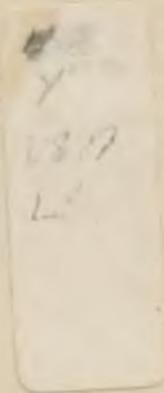
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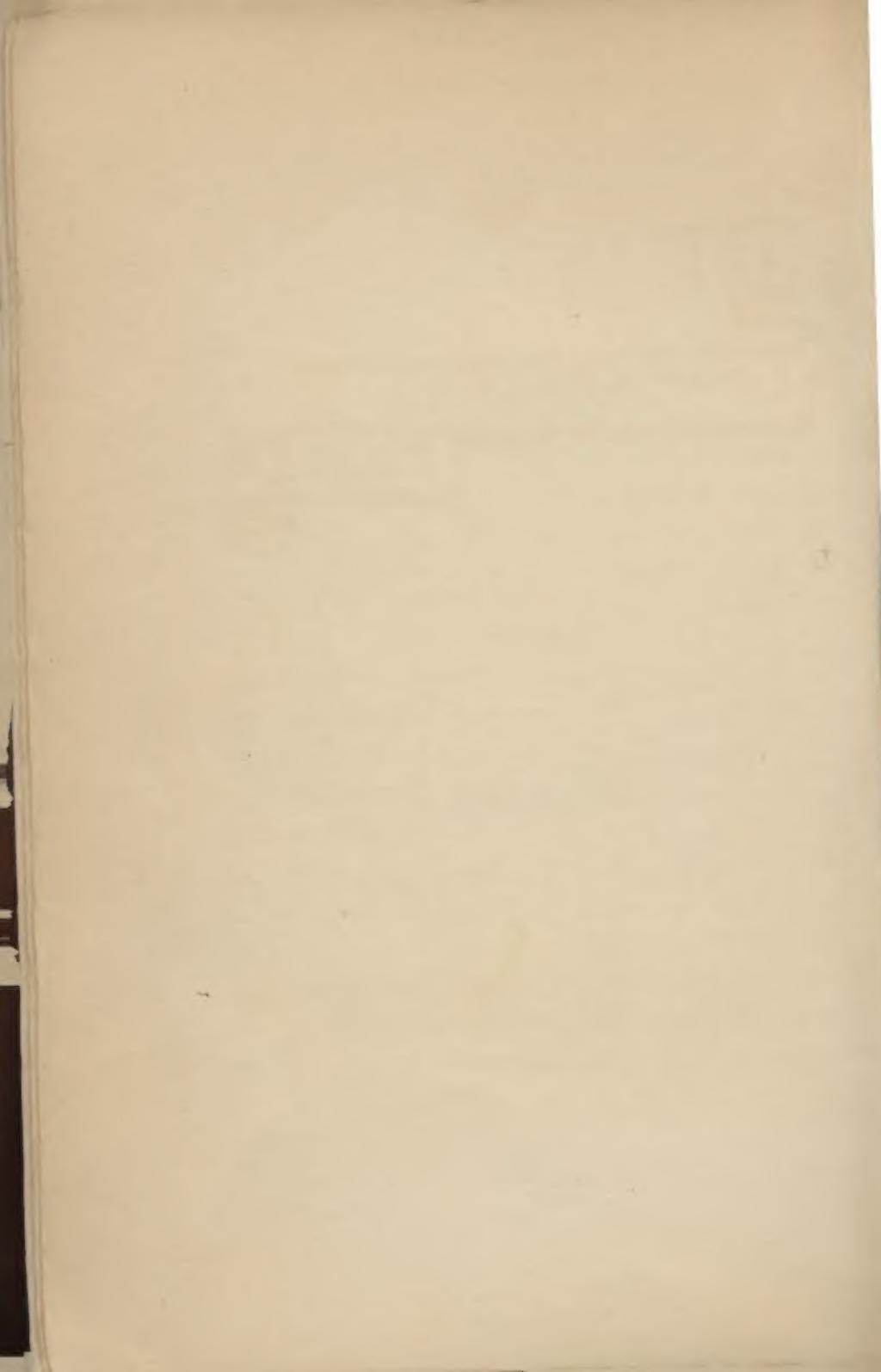
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THE LONESOMEST DOLL

I

MIGNON

THE lonesomest doll in the world lay staring up at the cover of her box and wished she had never been made. It is no fun to live in a palace if you are kept there in the dark of one tiny little corner. It is no fun to wear a beautiful gown if no one else ever sees it. It is no fun to be a Queen's doll if your royal mamma never plays with you at all.

Mignon longed to be hugged and kissed and loved like other dolls. She would rather be scarred and knocked about and broken like so

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many wax babies of whom she had heard, than be locked all alone day after day in tiresome safety.

You see, Mignon was the birthday gift which a great foreign Prince had sent to the little Queen Clotilde; and she was the most wonderful doll that had ever been heard of in those days. All this happened long ago, before you could buy such lovely dolls in the shops,—before jointed bodies, and shutting eyes, and real teeth, and china hands with fingers were invented. Yet Queen Clotilde's doll was even more beautiful than these; for she was made of wax, and her face was painted by a famous artist to look exactly like the Queen herself; and Queen Clotilde, you must know, was a wonderfully lovely little girl.

Mignon was not a very large doll—just big enough to hold comfortably. Her hair was golden, like the Queen's, curly and long. Her eyes were blue, her cheeks pink, and she had the dearest little turned-up nose ever seen, and red, red lips. She could talk, too, which was something in those days,—not like the Queen;

MIGNON

that would have been too wonderful to believe. But, like some of our accomplished dollies of to-day, Mignon could say "Mamma!" when you squeezed her gently.

The proudest thing about the Queen's wonderful doll was her clothes. There never was seen such a beautiful dress as Mignon wore when she came in her fine satin-lined box, on the Queen's eighth birthday. She was all in white satin and velvet and the richest lace, copied from the Queen's own coronation robe, with a long train; and she had a crown on her head. Moreover, the crown was of real gold set with the most beautiful jewels,—rubies, emeralds, sapphires, and diamonds. In the front was a great white pearl, worth the price of a hundred such dollies as you can buy to-day. And up and down the white velvet train was embroidered in gold and silver and precious stones; so that this was the most splendid birthday doll which any little girl ever had.

But that was precisely the trouble. Mignon was too splendid for a real *play* doll. One would always be afraid of hurting her fine clothes. Be-

THE LONESOMEST DOLL

sides, with all this gold and jewels, she was so valuable that the Lord Treasurer kept her locked up in a chest in the Treasure Room of the palace; and little Clotilde had her brought out only once or twice a year, to see how she herself had looked on the day when she was crowned Queen. Only once or twice a year to see one's mamma! This is why Mignon was the lonesomest doll in the world.



II

NICHETTE

THE lonesomest doll lay in her box in a corner of the Treasure Room in the southwest tower of the Queen's palace. Around the palace was a high gray wall and a moat; beyond the moat was a walled-in garden; and beyond the garden again was a tiny white cottage covered with roses, where Nichette lived with her father and mother!

Pierre, Nichette's father, was the porter of the palace, and under the eyes of the Grand Chamberlain he had charge of the keys to the

THE LONESOMEST DOLL

western wing where the Queen lived. So of course Pierre knew all about everything, even about the lonesomest doll whom very few persons had seen, though every one in the kingdom had heard of her. And of course Nichette knew all about her also.

Ever since she had first sat upon Pierre's knee, jingling his great bunch of keys in her baby fist, till now when she was a great girl of ten, she had loved to hear about the gates and the doors and the locks which these keys opened. And although she had never gone inside the palace she knew the way in and about almost as well as Pierre himself. And she knew just where the lonesomest doll lay, and up what stairs and along what hallway and through what rooms one must go to find her. She could see the window of the very room from the corner of the Queen's garden where she was allowed to play. And often when she was there with her own dolls she would look up at the gray tower and wish she could do something to comfort that poor, beautiful doll whose mamma was a little Queen, but did not love her.

NICHETTE



Nichette had four ugly wooden dolls of her own, and she loved them dearly. It made her heart ache to think of the lonely doll over there in the palace shut up in her dark box, taken out but once or twice in the long year. Nichette had often planned what she would do if she could but get into that tower, and up to

THE LONESOMEST DOLL

that room, and open that oaken chest. Her fingers ached to smooth Mignon's hair, to kiss her and cuddle her close. She had often begged Pierre to let her go into the west wing, but he always said,—“No, no, child! The Queen does not like children, and will allow none in the palace. It would make her very angry.”

So Nichette knew that she should never even see the lonesomest doll, unless some time she could steal into the palace without any one's knowing. But fierce soldiers mounted guard at the front gate, and at all the gates except the little one in the garden, to which Pierre held the keys. Through that would be her way—if she had the keys. But she could never, never enter without her father's keys, and he kept them always by him, very carefully, because he was the Lord Chamberlain's porter; and he was proud of the trust.

Nichette often wondered if a clever person might not take the keys from his pocket. But she would never dare do this; for Pierre was very stern when one was naughty; and she knew he would think this the naughtiest thing which

NICHETTE

a child could do. So Nichette could only long and long, hope and hope, that some time she might see the lonesomest doll and try to make her happy as a beautiful doll should be.



III

IN THE GARDEN

ONE fine day a most interesting thing happened. After dinner Pierre went out on the porch for his usual smoke, and when he took his pipe from his pocket he pulled out by mistake the precious bunch of keys, which dropped softly on a plot of grass, so that they made no jingling to call his attention. For some time Pierre did not notice the loss; and when he went away to work, there lay the keys for Nichette to find as

IN THE GARDEN

she came out of the cottage on her way back to her family of dolls, which she had left in the garden.

"Oh-h-h!" cried Nichette when her bright eyes spied the keys; and her heart danced up and down. Quick as a flash she popped the keys into her apron pocket, and ran as fast as her legs would carry her to the little gate which led into the Queen's garden. Being the porter's little girl, Nichette was allowed to play here on most days when the Queen was not about. And here, under a rosebush, was her doll-house, where the children were waiting.

Such a beautiful garden it was! Beds of the loveliest flowers were spread like gorgeous colored rugs over the green floor of the lawn. And where there was grass it grew tall and cool and tickly for one to roll in. There were great trees who held their parasols over fine shady spots. And along the wall climbed tall rosebushes; all about were roses, pink and white and laughing crimson, nodding, quivering, shaking their sweet petals down upon the heads of Nichette's dolls. Close by was the great sun-dial which told

THE LONESOMEST DOLL

Nichette when it was time to go home for tea, if the queer little uncomfortable clock inside herself had not already made her guess the hour of bread and milk.

But the glory of the garden was the marble fountain which stood in the middle, with its great bronze fish holding up his wide-open mouth as if to catch flies. Pierre said that the fish could spout a stream of water ten feet high when the Queen wished him to. Nichette had never seen him do it; she was always hoping that he would some day while she was in the garden. The fountain had a lovely basin, very convenient for washing the children's clothes, and for sailing rose-leaf boats and bigger craft of chips or paper.

Under the rosebush Nichette had told her dolls to wait for her; and she found the obedient family just as she had left them. They were a battered quartette, with but half a dozen legs, and not so many arms among them; and even when they were new they must have been ugly little wooden things. But Nichette loved them dearly. She set them all up in a row and kissed

IN THE GARDEN



them in turn, as if she had been gone a long, long time, instead of just two hours by the old sun-dial, who never told lies as some clocks do. Nichette was much excited.

"See what I have found, children!" she cried, pulling the bunch of keys from her apron pocket and holding them up before the dolls' staring eyes. The dolls did not seem much impressed, but Nichette did not wait for them to exclaim.

THE LONESOMEST DOLL

"Do you know what these are?" she went on in a giant whisper. "They are the palace keys. See, here is the one that unlocks the little gate there in the wall behind you. Here is the key to the first turret door. This is the armory key, and this — Oh, children, do you know what I am going to do?"

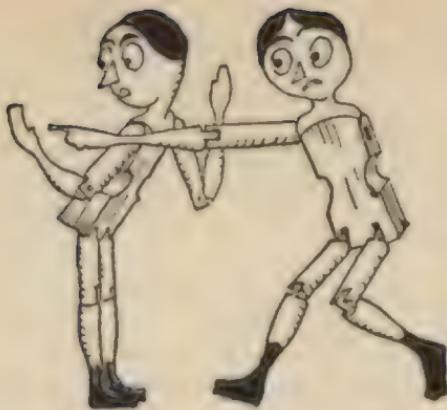
Nichette bent over and whispered to the dolls in a low voice, her eyes big with eagerness. "Do you see this little bit of a golden key? It is the key to the horrid chest where they have locked away the lonesomest doll. I am going to find Mignon and make her happy for once. Oh, children! Think how dreadful it must be to stay all the year shut up in a box, and never to see your mamma at all." Nichette's brown eyes filled with tears, and she gathered the four dolls in her arms and held them close.

"You are not going to be cross if I leave you here all alone for a little while?" she said coaxingly. "You will not be jealous if you know I am playing mother to that poor, lonely dollie whose own mamma does not love her as I love you, children? Oh, I am so glad I found those keys!"

IN THE GARDEN

But I must hurry, or Father will discover that he has lost them, and then it will be too late to go. Good-bye, my dears. Each of you send a kiss to the lonesomest doll."

And Nichette received on her lips the four hard little round kisses which her children dutifully rendered as she set them down one by one under the rosebush. They were not the least bit jealous, for they were kind-hearted dolls. But they had heard Nichette talk so much about Mignon, the lonesomest doll, that they were somewhat tired of the subject, and could not look much interested, hard though they tried.



IV

THE BUNCH OF KEYS

It was about two o'clock and everything was very quiet in the village, for most of the people were taking their after-dinner nap. Mother Marie was dozing on the bench beside the cottage door, Nichette imagined. Probably the folk in the Queen's palace were asleep, too; for most of them were elderly persons whose chief exercise was snoring after dinner,—and a musical exercise it was, to say truth!

It was Nichette's great chance,—of that she was sure. After waiting for it so long it might never come again. She did not think it could be so very wrong to do what she had in mind; for

THE BUNCH OF KEYS

she only wanted to be kind to Mignon. She forgot that by meddling with what did not belong to her she might get her father into trouble; and she never suspected what strange things would happen,—things which came near to upsetting the whole kingdom.

Nichette took the bunch of keys and tiptoed up to the gate in the wall behind the rosebush.



THE LONESOMEST DOLL

She thrust the largest key into the lock and twisted hard with both hands. It was a rusty turn; but at last with a hoarse "screek!" the gate swung open, and Nichette stood on the threshold looking for the first time into the wonderful world beyond.

There was the moat and the drawbridge lowered for any one to pass; there was the green trim lawn, and, beyond, the gray towers of the palace where lived the proud little Queen and her beautiful lonesome doll. How big the palace seemed; how many windows it had peering down upon one like watchful eyes! How wide a space it was from this wicket to the little door of the southwest turret which Nichette must reach!

For a moment her courage faltered, and she was almost ready to run back to her own children and leave the Queen's doll to herself. Then she thought again of poor Mignon and this great chance to see her which might never come again. And she screwed her courage into place again.

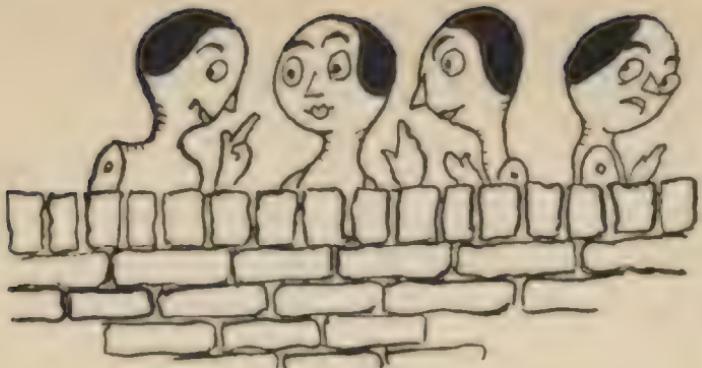
With one last glance behind to make sure that no one was following, Nichette stepped through the gateway upon the velvet lawn. The gate

THE BUNCH OF KEYS

swung to behind her with a clang, and her heart gave a great thump. But she did not think of retreating.

She felt as though she were living in a fairy tale. There in front of her lay the enchanted castle, with the fair Princess waiting to be wakened from her long loneliness. And Nichette herself was the Prince, who must wake her with a kiss.

Forward, Prince! You have passed the hedge, and now it would be cowardly to turn back.



V

IN THE QUEEN'S PALACE

NICHETTE scampered over the drawbridge and across the lawn to the little turret door. It was a relief to be out of sight of those staring window-eyes in the palace walls, — she hoped no one had seen her. She knew just which key to choose for the turret door and it opened easily. It was fortunate that she had learned the way so well by listening to Pierre; for it was dark inside. Nichette had not expected that! She could scarcely see the stairs which wound dizzily up and up like a twisted ladder.

But bravely she began to climb, counting the steps as she went, — "thirty-three, thirty-four, thirty-five." Evidently these stairs were seldom

IN THE QUEEN'S PALACE

used, for now and then a dusty spider's web brushed unpleasantly across her face and got into her mouth. There was another entrance upon the Queen's lawn from Her Majesty's own apartments as Nichette knew. This was only the back way that Pierre the Porter and a few others sometimes found convenient.

At last she reached the top, and paused out of breath to select the third key for the door in front of her. It took but a moment, for she knew them all by heart. This was a rusty iron fellow with a queer notch in the end. He fitted easily, and the lock "clicked" an invitation to come in.

When Nichette pushed open the door, oh! she gave a scream. Almost on the threshold a figure in black armor was pointing his sword directly at her as if he meant to cut her head off. Nichette dodged back and almost shut the door in his face. But in a moment she saw how silly she had been to be afraid. This room was the armory. Surely, this was only an empty suit of armor placed there to frighten any intruder like herself. There were many others ranged along the walls, stiff and immovable and glum, with their iron

THE LONESOMEST DOLL

hats pulled down over their eyes, — if they had any, — and their iron gloves grasping strange and dangerous weapons. But the doorkeeper looked so particularly alive and fierce that Nichette steered past him in a wide half-circle, keeping her eyes on him to make sure that he did not turn and follow her out of the little door opposite the first one.

She did not pause to examine the beautiful banners and shields hung all about, nor the curious patterns of suns and stars made upon the walls by the blades of glittering swords and lances and knives. It was a wonderful room, but the next one was even more wonderful. Nichette entered on tiptoe, and though she had expected to see a tempting sight, she could not help crying "Oh!" to find it even more delightful than her dreams.

Around the four walls were boxes upon boxes of toys, packed one above another. Games and carts, toy animals and doll-houses, and things that went when you wound them up, stood all about on the floor. And there were shelves of picture-books rising to the ceiling. Everything

IN THE QUEEN'S PALACE



looked quite new as if it had never been used, and it seemed like a toy shop where only the choicest, most expensive things were sold. Nichette looked and drew a long breath. She longed to stop and examine them, to touch them

THE LONESOMEST DOLL

and make them go. But she thought of what she had come to do, and remembered the lonesomeness of the lonesomest doll.

So she turned away to a tiny little door on the left, — a tiny little door that one would never find unless she knew just where to look, it seemed so like a panel in the wall. One, two, three, four, five, — yes, it was in the fifth panel, for there was the tiny keyhole to show that it was a door.



VI

THE TREASURE CLOSET

THE key to this door was of silver, and it opened into a little closet lined with iron. The door was lined with iron, too, barred and barred across. Inside were rows of metal caskets and stout wooden boxes which looked important, as if they guarded precious things. But Nichette had eyes for only one of these, — she knew just where to look. It was a big box about two feet long, of carved oak in a beautiful pattern, with a golden keyhole in the side.

Nichette's fingers trembled as she took a tiny golden key from the bunch and thrust it into the lock. In a minute she had lifted up the cover;

THE LONESOMEST DOLL

and as she did so what do you think? A weak little voice inside piped "Mamma!" in the saddest tone. Nichette pulled off the satin quilt that covered the top, and there lay the lonesomest doll, even more beautiful than she had imagined.

"Oh!" cried Nichette, clapping her hands. "Oh, you sweet dollie! How I love you!" And never thinking at all about the satin gown, or the lace, or the crown of jewels, or any of Mignon's tiresome clothes, Nichette seized the doll from her box and hugged her up close in her arms.

Poor lonesome Mignon! How good it seemed really to be kissed and petted at last, even though it did snarl her golden curls and crease the velvet train; and even though a little spot of red melted off her rosy cheek when Nichette's lips touched her. It was the first time that she had been happy in her life, though she lived in a palace with a Queen for her truly mamma. But this little girl in the coarse woolen gown, with sunburned hands, and with freckles on her dear little nose, already seemed much more like a mamma, though Mignon had seen her for only a minute and a half.

THE TREASURE CLOSET



Nichette sat down on the floor with Mignon in her arms, and began to play with the loneliest doll and to talk with her as she would talk to her own ugly darlings. She told her about the garden and the rosebush and the four wooden dolls. She explained about the fountain and the green grass and the sunshine which Mignon had never seen.

"That is because you are a Queen's dollie,

THE LONESOMEST DOLL

poor thing," said Nichette, and she hugged Mignon closer. So she made the lonesomest doll happy for a long, long time, and the shadows began to fall more darkly, but Nichette did not notice. She was talking with Mignon about Clotilde, the Queen.

"How beautiful you are!" said Nichette. "I do not see how your truly mamma can help loving you. She must be lovely to look at if, as they say, she is exactly like you. I have never seen her, but I know just what she is like *inside*. She is proud and disagreeable. She never goes to walk, nor plays outdoors, — she is too finely dressed, — as you are, my Mignon. I should not let you wear these lovely clothes every day. She never comes into my garden except to see the fountain play. I never saw the fountain play. Oh, how I should like to! But when she comes they lock the doors and will not let me in. Then they sweep all the rose leaves up, and shave the lawns close and ugly, and scrape the pretty green moss off the sun-dial. And she makes them throw away my playthings under the rosebush, so when I come the next day they

THE TREASURE CLOSET

are gone, — all my teaset and my flower children and my mud pies. I do not like the Queen, Mignon. I wish you were my dollie. You would be so much happier!"



VII

CLOTILDE, THE QUEEN

NICHETTE was talking so fast that she did not hear a soft step cross the toy-room beyond and pause in the doorway behind her.

"You do not like the Queen," said a voice close to her ear, it seemed. "Why, pray?" Nichette jumped and almost dropped Mignon, she was so startled. She turned about and then her eyes and mouth made three big round O's as she saw what was there. In the doorway stood a little girl, about as big as Nichette herself, dressed all in shining silk. But what made Nichette think "*Oh*" so hard was this: it seemed as though it must be Mignon herself standing there, this beautiful little girl was so like her. There

CLOTILDE, THE QUEEN



were the long golden curls, the blue eyes, the pale pink cheeks, the red lips, -- even the dimple in the round chin. Nichette stared first at the little girl, then at the doll, then back again. It was Mignon come alive!

"Oh — oh! You must be the Queen!" gasped Nichette at last, "you are so like the lonesomest doll."

"The 'lonesomest doll'? Why do you call her that? And how do you come here?" asked the

THE LONESOMEST DOLL



little girl in a calm, low voice without seeming angry or surprised. "I followed you through the door which you left ajar. What are you doing in my treasure room?"

Nichette sat staring at the stranger dazedly. She was so beautiful, her voice was so soft,

CLOTILDE, THE QUEEN

how could this be the proud, haughty, disagreeable little Queen whom Nichette did not love? Yet there was Mignon, beautiful also; and the Queen did not love her, but had neglected her and made her the lonesomest doll. Nichette's eyes flashed, and she rose to her feet unafraid, clasping Mignon tight.

"I came to see the poor lonesomest doll whom you do not love. I came to tell her that *I* love her though I am not her truly mamma, and to hug and kiss her as dollies like to be hugged and kissed," she said.

The Queen's cheeks turned a shade pinker. "She is my doll," she said coldly. "How dared you touch her? How did you get in?"

"My father is Pierre the Porter," answered Nichette bravely. "I found his bunch of keys to-day and I came to see Mignon. I have not hurt ner, and she is very happy." The Queen looked at the doll closely hugged in Nichette's arms, and a strange look came into her face.

"Do you really think she cares?" she asked.
"Of course she cares," said Nichette. "Dolls

THE LONESOMEST DOLL

love to be played with. They are lonesome if you leave them always in a box. How would you like to be left day after day alone, with no one to love and kiss you?"

The Queen's face turned still pinker.

"I have no one to love me," she said. Nichette stared. A Queen, and no one to love her! This was very strange. "Why don't you play with your dollie, then?" she demanded. "I have no brothers nor sisters, but I have my dolls, and I play with them in the garden all day long."

The Queen looked puzzled.

"Play?" she said. "How do you play with a doll? I don't know how to play!"

"Don't know how to play!" Nichette exclaimed. "Why, you play just as you do with other playthings. You just *play*."

"But I never played in my life." The Queen stood looking at Nichette in helpless puzzlement, and Nichette stared frankly back.

"Never played! Then what do you do with all those things?" she pointed at the toys in the room beyond.

"I never play with them. I don't know how.

CLOTILDE, THE QUEEN

There is nobody to play with," explained the Queen bitterly. "Oh, I never knew what it was until I watched you. I never before saw a little girl play with a doll. I never before talked with a little girl. Why did they not tell me about you?"

Now the poor little Queen's father and mother had died when she was a wee baby. Only grown-up uncles and aunts had watched her and tried to make her wise and dignified as they thought a Queen should be. There were no little cousin princes or princesses, no neighboring highborn ladykins to be her playmates; and they had never dreamed of asking any real live children from round about to play with their noble Queen. She was just the age of Nichette, but she had never once been outdoors to play; never once run or hopped or skipped in the good warm sun; never once sat on the floor with a box of toys, nor put a doll to sleep. They thought a Queen ought not to care for any of these things.

The Queen and Nichette looked hard at each other. "I am glad you came," said the

THE LONESOMEST DOLL

Queen at last. She smiled and held out her hand. "Come and show me how to play," she added, and they went out into the toy-room together.



VIII THE TOY-ROOM

THEY soon forgot all about Nichette's uninvited call. They forgot Pierre, who was hunting high and low for his bunch of keys. They forgot the Queen's anxious ladies-in-waiting, who never thought of looking for her in the toy-room, but were searching wildly all over the rest of the palace from watch-tower to the dark dungeons underground. They even forgot Nichette's dolls waiting patiently for her under the rosebush. For Nichette and the Queen were pulling open all the boxes of toys, scattering things over the floor, and having a beautiful time.

"Oh, what lovely, lovely playthings!" cried

THE LONESOMEST DOLL

Nichette, jumping up and down and clapping her hands over a fine teaset.

"Are they lovely?" said the Queen. "I never thought so before. I don't know what to do with them. My subjects are always sending me expensive things which my guardians say are too nice to use. So they pack them off here to be kept safely. But we will use them now, Nichette, and you shall play with me."

So they emptied out the gold-and-silver dishes that were so easily scratched. And they set up the play-house furniture of real rosewood that showed every thumb-mark and had always been handled by servants with gloves. And they arranged the best doll-house for Mignon to live in, and gave a tea party.

Oh, what fun it was! The lonesomest doll had never been so happy. And as for the Queen, she actually laughed out loud six times, which was something no one had ever heard her do. All this time she had not touched Mignon, — she seemed almost afraid to handle the doll, poor little Queen. But at last she said, —

"Nichette, I think I will take Mignon for a

THE TOY-ROOM

little while." And with a sigh Nichette handed the lonesomest doll to her truly mamma. Clotilde held her awkwardly at first.

"Do you think she likes it?" she asked timidly. "I don't yet know how, very well."

Nichette clapped her hands and danced for joy. "Oh, she is so happy!" she cried. "Kiss her, Queen."

Clotilde hesitated. "I—I don't know how," she faltered.

"Don't know how to kiss her! Oh, Queen! I will show you," and Nichette threw her arms about the two, and kissed first the doll, then the little royal mother. Clotilde turned very pale, then red as one of the garden roses.

"I never had any one kiss me before," she said. "No one in the palace would dare. My uncles and aunts would not think of doing anything so—so undignified. Is that why you called Mignon the lonesomest doll,—because I left her all alone and never kissed her?"

Nichette nodded.

"Well, I am more lonesome than she, Nichette," said the little Queen sadly, looking down

THE LONESOMEST DOLL

at the doll and hugging her close. "Does your mamma kiss you often like that?"

"Every night and every morning and sometimes in between," returned Nichette proudly. "Often in between when I am very good."

The Queen gave a sudden sigh, and the tears began to roll down her cheeks. "I never had any mother to kiss me," she said. "Oh, how I wish I could have a real mother-kiss once, just once. Nichette!"

Nichette was busy thinking. It was growing dark, and she began to realize that she must be going home, though she hated to leave her new friend the Queen and the dear doll, no longer lonesome. Suddenly she clapped her hands and turned to Clotilde eagerly. "Oh, I have a plan!" she cried. "Would you really like to have a mother kiss you good-night, Queen?"

The Queen nodded wonderingly.

"Then this is what we will do. It is nearly dusk and I must go home. Father will punish me when he finds out what I have done, but I don't care. Dear Queen, you shall come home with me; I will hide you somewhere, and when

THE TOY-ROOM

it is bedtime you shall snuggle in my little bed, and mother will kiss you in the dark instead of me. Then when they think me asleep, we will steal back here out of the window and I will lock the doors and the gates behind you with Father's keys. Is it not a lovely plan?"

At first Clotilde was frightened. She had never before thought of running away from the palace, and it seemed very wicked. But she had grown so tired of doing as every one expected her to do, that soon the idea seemed pleasant. Besides, she longed and longed for that real mother-kiss. It was an exciting adventure, and would be something to remember always. Her eyes began to sparkle and she grew as eager as Nichette herself. For she was full of fun, was this poor little Queen who had never played.

"I'll do it!" she cried. "They will hunt for me, but they dare not be angry when I come back. For am I not the Queen?" She drew herself up proudly, and for the first time Nichette felt awed and impressed. But Clotilde soon became little-girlish again.

"I will go with you, Nichette," she said, put-

THE LONESOMEST DOLL

ting her hand in her little friend's. "And Mignon shall go also. But we must hurry, or they will come hunting for us both, and then I could never go."

So, holding Mignon close, the Queen followed Nichette away, through the armor room, down the dark crooked stairway, until they came out upon the Queen's lawn in front of the palace. And this was the first time that the Queen had ever been out of doors without a grown person or a servant to watch and ward her.





IX

MOTHER MARIE

IT was shadowy on the lawn, for it was after sunset. No one seemed to be looking, so hand in hand the two children ran across the drawbridge to the wicket in the garden wall which Nichette pushed open. Then for the first time the Queen found herself in her own garden, unswept and untrimmed to receive her.

"How beautiful it is here!" she cried, looking down at the rose-leaf carpet such as she had never seen. "I never saw it like this before, wild and unfussy. After this I shall come here often to play with you, Nichette."

"And may I see the fountain play?" asked Nichette wistfully.

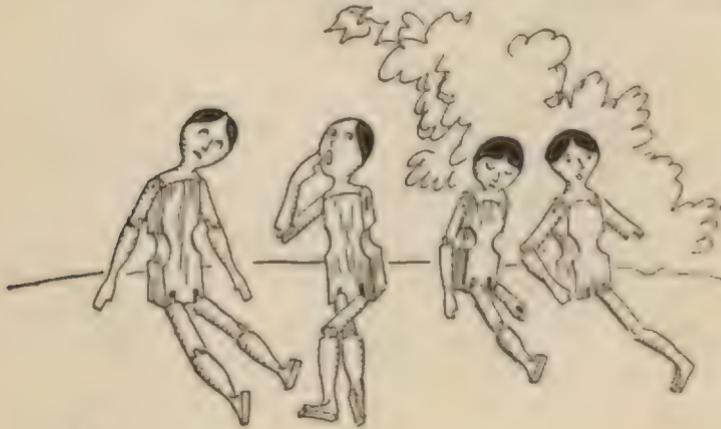
"Why, did you never see it?" asked the Queen

THE LONESOMEST DOLL

in surprise. Then Nichette told her all about it; how the Queen had always shut her out on those holidays, when her playthings were swept up and her mud pies broken.

"And you thought I did it, and so you did not love me. Oh, Nichette!" said the Queen reproachfully. "It was the horrid gardener. But I never told him to do that. I did not know there was a little girl who played here. You shall always come after this, and I shall play here with you. And we will never have it fixed up and spoiled."

Nichette led the Queen to the rosebush where the four dolls were waiting in the same patient row. "This is my cubby-house," she said, "and



MOTHER MARIE

here you must hide till I have had my supper. Then when it is bedtime I will come and show you the way."

"I am hungry," said the Queen.

"I will bring you half of my supper and you shall eat it here," said Nichette.

"That will be very nice," laughed Clotilde eagerly. "Hurry, hurry, Nichette!"

Then Nichette went back to the cottage. And there she found a great hubbub. For Pierre was away hunting for his keys which were nowhere to be found, and his good wife was worrying lest he should lose his place if the Lord Chamberlain came to know. To be sure, there was even more exciting news which would keep the Lord Chamberlain from troubling at present about Pierre and his keys. For Clotilde the Queen was missing from the palace! But, truth to tell, poor Pierre was frightened almost out of his wits for fear that the same person who had found the keys had entered the palace and kidnapped the Queen. But this dreadful fear he had not told his wife.

Good Mother Marie gave Nichette her supper, and even helped her to an extra plateful of scones and another slice of black bread. She was so

THE LONESOMEST DOLL

anxious about the Father's lost keys that she did not notice how fast the food disappeared. Nichette had a capital chance to hide the extra scones and the bread in her apron.

"I am going back to the garden to get my dolls, Mamma," said Nichette after supper.

"Well, well, Nichette. But after that come straight home, child, for it is almost bedtime," answered Mother Marie carelessly, for she was thinking of other things. "Oh, suppose Pierre never finds his keys! What shall we do, what shall we do?" she was saying to herself.

Now Nichette felt guilty about those same keys which at that minute were bulging out the pocket of her apron. When she found what a trouble it had made she almost wished she had not run away with them in the first place, and she longed to tell her mother all about it and ease her of her worry. But that would rob the poor little Queen of her promised kiss. Nichette could not do that. No, she could not tell just yet. She ran all the way back to the garden.



X THE PLOT

"HERE is your supper, Queen," panted Nichette as she reached the rosebush. She spread the scones and the slice of bread on a shingle and pushed it towards the Queen, who was sitting on the grass with Mignon in her arms. The four dolls stared in wooden admiration.

Clotilde had never before known what it was to be hungry and to wait for her supper. At first she looked sidewise at the coarse black bread and the cakes of fried porridge. But when she saw that Nichette looked surprised at her hesitation she took up a piece of this strange food, and when she had once nibbled a crumb she ate heartily. Oh, how good this picnic supper tasted to the little Queen who had always been served indoors

THE LONESOMEST DOLL

at a stupid big table by men in powdered wigs and livery, with solemn grown folk standing all around.

"That was very nice!" said Clotilde when she had finished. "The next time you shall come to sup with me, but we shall not have such good things as those," and she smiled at Nichette and threw her arm about her neck.

"Now come," said Nichette, "come with me, Queen. It is almost dark, and we can creep into the cottage without Mother's seeing us."

So with Mignon held close, and her heart beating fast, — for this was the first time she had been outside her palace after dark, — the Queen followed Nichette and her four dolls through the little gate and down the lane beyond, where the cottage was. They crept along close to the wall, and at last they came to the window of Nichette's chamber.

"You crawl in through the window," whispered Nichette, "and I will go around by the door." So with much pushing and giggling and bruising of tender little knees that had never before climbed like this, the Queen was finally tumbled in at the window, and found herself in

THE PLOT

a heap on the floor of Nichette's tiny white bedroom. Clotilde hid behind a chair, trembling with excitement, but laughing, too, at the fun of this adventure. And crouching so she heard Nichette and her mother talking in the room beyond.

How kind and gentle Mother Marie's voice was! The poor little Queen all alone in the dark gave a great sigh as she wondered how it would seem to have a mother of her own: a mother of her own whom she could see every morning and every noon and every night. How safe one would feel, and never, never lonely.

"Now, then, off to bed with you, child," said Mother Marie at last; and the Queen's heart jumped. "Pray that your father may find his keys before to-morrow, or the Lord Chamberlain will have him punished. In five minutes I will come in to tuck you up and kiss you good-night."

Then Nichette came running into the little bedroom and shut the door behind her. "Oh, hurry, Queen!" she said. "Jump into bed just as you are, and cover yourself up close to your chin. I will hide in the closet here, and Mamma will never know, for she does not bring a candle."

THE LONESOMEST DOLL

So the Queen crept into Nichette's white bed, and drew the rose-scented sheets up over herself and Mignon. For Clotilde still held the loneliest doll clasped close. Hardly had Nichette time to run into the closet before they heard the mother's steps coming along to the door. The Queen lay very still and trembled, she hardly knew why. Surely not because she was afraid,— who could be afraid of that gentle-voiced mother?



XI

THE GOOD-NIGHT KISS

THEN the door opened and Mother Marie entered. It was quite dark now, and the Queen could not see her face. But when the good mother bent over her and kissed her so tenderly, whispering the blessing and the good-night in her ear, the poor little Queen's heart gave a great throb. Before she knew it she had thrown her arms around Marie's neck and had pulled the rough cheek down close to hers. It was so good to feel a mother face close by! But then a queer thing happened. Mother Marie's elbows pressed down upon the coverlet and the doll hidden on Clotilde's breast. And from under the bedclothes came a faint little voice crying,—“Mamma!”

THE LONESOMEST DOLL

"Mercy on me! What is that?" cried the good woman, starting back from the bed. And the Queen, frightened by this sudden movement, bobbed up her head from the pillow. And just at that moment a ray of moonlight came in at the window and showed the curly yellow hair flowing all about the little face, quite different from the straight black braids of Nichette.

"Mercy on me!" screamed Mother Marie again. "It is not my Nichette. It is a changeling,—a fairy child!" But the little Queen did not wait to let her examine closer. For she had had a new fright. A man's loud voice was ringing through the cottage, and a man's heavy tread was approaching the room where Marie's scream had sounded.

With one bound Clotilde sprang from the bed, still clasping the naughty Mignon, who had spoken when she should not. And before Mother Marie could stop her or Nichette come out of her closet to explain, she had popped out of the window by which she had entered.

Away and away she ran, as fast as her feet would take her, towards the garden, as she thought. She did not know what she feared. But

THE GOOD-NIGHT KISS

the surprise of it all, the strangeness, had upset her nerves,—and Nichette had not been by to help. Besides, a man was coming,—some big, coarse, ugly man. The Queen hated loud-voiced, heavy-footed men, and she could not bear that one of her common subjects should find her hiding so in Nichette's room.

So she ran on and on in the dark, thinking that soon she should find the garden and the little gate, and so get back to the palace lawn, her own lawn. (She forgot that Nichette had locked all the doors behind them!) But, though she did not know it, she was really going in the opposite direction. Clotilde was so unused to being out alone that her poor little head was easily turned, and she was as wrong as wrong could be.

Clotilde ran so fast for the first time in her life that soon she was tired and out of breath, and had to sit down on a stone to rest. Then she looked about her, and knew that she was lost.

Now she had something to be really frightened about. For she had no idea how to get back to her palace, and it was very dark and still. The lonesomest doll, who was to blame for it all, because she had cried out at the wrong moment, lay

THE LONESOMEST DOLL

quiet now and had no help to offer in finding out the way. Clotilde did not know that all the servants, and officials, and relatives of the Queen were out hunting for her in every direction, and that bands of soldiers on horseback were galloping off into the neighboring towns to inquire whether she had been seen there or not.

She did not guess that even now Nichette, frightened and sobbing, was telling her father and mother all about it. It was Pierre's big boots and his loud voice, full of anger and puzzlement over the loss of his keys, that had so frightened Clotilde. But she need not have been afraid. That loud voice belonged to a kind heart, and those big boots were now hurrying out along the road in loving pursuit of the little Queen in whose service they had tramped ever since she was a baby.

Alas! Pierre was tramping in the opposite direction, and so were the servants, officials, relatives, and soldiers. But other boots were striding along the road towards Clotilde. She heard them coming, but she was too tired to run away. Perhaps,—she hoped,—perhaps they might belong to friends.

THE GOOD-NIGHT KISS

No: these were the footsteps of no friends. In these boots were persons of another sort, — persons such as Clotilde had never seen until this night.



XII

THE ROBBERS

PRESENTLY into a ray of moonlight came two villainous faces, villainous as far as Clotilde could see them under the slouched hats which cast them into evil shadows. One was dark, with a scar running across the nose from eye to lip. And one was puffed and purple, with a short red beard bristling on cheek and chin.

Clotilde's heart sank. She jumped to her feet and tried to dodge into the shadow, for she knew these were no friends. But it was too late. One of the men, he with the livid scar, had spied her, and came running up.

THE ROBBERS

"Not so fast, little one, not so fast!" he cried in a gruff voice, and he laid a rough hand on Clotilde's arm. The other man hurried up, and after a long stare at her whispered in his comrade's ear, — "It is she, the Queen; we're in luck, Jacques!" But aloud he said, "How now, my pretty one! Where are you going so late? Is it not time for little folks to be abed?"

The Queen was thoroughly frightened now, but she felt that she must not let these men see it. She drew herself up proudly.

"I am the Queen," she said. "Hands off, fellows! And take me to my palace." But she saw the short man wink at the other, and they both began to laugh.

"Hoity toity! The *Queen*, you say?" cried the tall one whose name was Jacques. "You can't make us believe that the Queen would be out here so late, and alone. Tell us another story, child." He drew Clotilde forward into the moonlight, though she held back as strongly as she could.

Suddenly the man's eye caught the flash of the jewels on Mignon's dress and crown. "What's that you have there?" he said eagerly, at the

THE LONESOMEST DOLL

same time giving his companion a nudge and pointing to the doll.

"It is my doll, Mignon. Everybody has heard of Mignon," said the Queen, hugging the loneliest doll closer, and trying to wriggle away from the rough grasp of Jacques. But he held her all the tighter; and with an exclamation, Jean, the other ruffian, drew near and bent down to look at Mignon in the moonlight.

"Oh, yes, we have heard of the Queen's precious doll," he said. "But that does not explain how *you* happen to have her, my pretty. I am afraid you found those lost keys about which there is such a to-do in the village there. And I believe you took the opportunity to steal into the Queen's palace and pick out a dollie for yourself. But this is too fine a plaything for most little girls. I'm afraid we must take you to the sheriff and hear an explanation." And he made a sign to Jacques over Clotilde's head.

"It is not true. I am the QUEEN!" protested Clotilde indignantly, stamping her foot. Just then from somewhere sounded the thud of horses' hoofs, coming nearer and nearer.

"They're coming,—we must be quick!" ex-

THE ROBBERS

claimed Jean. The two men whispered together for a moment, and suddenly Jacques clapped his hand over Clotilde's mouth and swung her up upon his shoulder, Mignon and all, for the Queen held her dollie close. Clotilde struggled and kicked. But it was of no use, he held her firmly and evidently did not mean to let her go.

The other man ran on ahead, Jacques with his burden following closely. Presently they came to a tree where two horses were tied. The men came to a standstill, and Jacques took his hand from the Queen's mouth to untie his horse. Then Clotilde seized the chance to scream, and scream she did as loud as her little lungs would let her. But with an angry word Jean stepped up to her and Br-r-r! she felt her mouth bound fast with a great handkerchief.

"No more of that, my lady," he said roughly. "You'll come to prison quietly with us and it will be all right. Just let those fellows who are coming catch you and, *whew!* you'll be sorry!" But Clotilde knew that, whoever they might be, she could never fear any one half so much as those two men with bad, bad faces.

"Better tie her up, Jacques," said Jean in a

THE LONESOMEST DOLL

low voice. "You have your hands full now to manage Black Bête." And presently Clotilde felt something tight drawn about her ankles, fastening them together; while rough cords bound her arms down close, close over Mignon so that she could not stir nor struggle. Oh, how helpless she felt, dumb and stiff and straightened as she was!

Jean was already on his horse. "Hurry, Jacques!" he cried, "they are nearing fast."

In a moment Jacques also was in the saddle, with Clotilde fast held in one arm. Then Black Bête snorted and dashed away at the kick which the ruffian gave him.

"We must get to the Black Wood road before they find our tracks," cried Jean. "It is a wild game we are playing, and if we lose,—we are lost."

Clotilde's heart sank. She knew now who these men were. She had often heard of the bold robbers who lived in the Black Wood, outlaws of another kingdom. Jean and Jacques were robbers! Oh, they would kill her and steal Mignon for the sake of her jewels! She had seen how their greedy eyes glittered at the sight of the doll's ornaments. But she did not guess what

THE ROBBERS

Jean and Jacques really meant to do, which was to steal Clotilde herself and keep her in their forest den until her people should pay an enormous ransom of gold and silver to get her back.

The robbers had slunk into Clotilde's town that afternoon in disguise, to see what mischief there was afoot. And as luck would have it, they had stayed long enough to hear all the outcry upon the Queen's disappearance. So they had put their wicked heads together, and had decided to try to find her, if she was to be found. They had hunted and prowled in vain, and were just about to give up the search in disgust, when by chance they had stumbled upon the poor little Queen, just as she was fleeing from Pierre's house. And here they were now galloping away towards the Black Wood with Queen Clotilde and her famous doll,—which was better luck even than they had hoped for.



XIII THE STOLEN QUEEN

THEY were flying over the ground like wild creatures at a hunt, and Clotilde's little heart was beating like a trip-hammer with excitement and fear. All of a sudden she heard a strange sound in front, and then an ugly exclamation from the robber who rode ahead of them. Jacques reined up Black Bête with a jerk. "What is the matter?" he growled, and there was a click of a pistol close beside Clotilde's ear.

At first they could not see anything in the darkness. But presently Clotilde caught sight

THE STOLEN QUEEN

of the robber Jean limping up to Black Bête's saddle.

"My horse fell and has broken his leg, I think," he whispered hoarsely. "It's no use. They're coming close behind. They'll hang me if I'm caught. You can't desert a comrade — take me up behind, Jacques. Black Bête can carry double. But you must leave the Queen. They'll stop when they find her, and we shall escape safely to the Wood."

"What luck!" grumbled Jacques. "You blundering knave, can't you keep a horse from stumbling? We are losing the chance of our lives," and he muttered an ugly oath. Then a sudden thought struck him. "But at least we can keep the doll. Her jewels alone are worth a Queen's ransom, if all I've heard of them be true. Leave the Queen, then, if we must. We'll get something out of this night's work. Here, help me with the child."

Clotilde's heart throbbed wildly. Poor Mignon seemed about to become once more the loneliest doll — lonesome in a strange land, carried to a den of robbers! And oh, how lonesome the Queen would be without her, now that she had

THE LONESOMEST DOLL

learned to love her so dearly! As if she were only a doll herself Jacques handed her down to Jean, who stood on the ground beside them. But when he tried to pull Mignon from Clotilde's closebound arms she clung as tightly as she could.

"Mamma, Mamma, Mamma!" cried Mignon frightenedly, as her poor little body was squeezed in the rough grasp of Jean.

"What's that? Heavens above! What's that?" gasped the robber, who had never before heard of a talking doll. And he fell back, imagining it the voice of a fairy, — just as Mother Marie had done.

But Jacques was less easily frightened. "Oh, come on! Be quick about it," he muttered. "They are hard upon us -- give me the doll." And, indeed, the sound of hoofs was very near now echoing down the road behind them.

Jacques tore the doll from Clotilde's arms, and was hurrying back to his horse when again in his hands Mignon began to cry — "Mamma, Mamma, Mamma!" so piteously that he paused. He glanced from the doll down at Clotilde, who lay on the grass in the moonlight with the tears running down her cheeks, looking after Mignon. She

THE STOLEN QUEEN

could not speak because of the handkerchief which muffled her poor little mouth. But her eyes said as plainly as anything, — “Oh, my dear dollie! Don’t take away my dear doll!”

Perhaps Jacques had once had a little girl of his own who loved dolls. Perhaps he had not always been a bad man, and a terror to little children, whose very name would frighten them at night. At all events his heart softened a little bit.

“It’s a witch doll,” he muttered to himself. “It will not leave her. It will bring us bad luck.— Oh, let her keep her doll,” he growled roughly to Jean, who was already in the saddle. “All we want is the gems — the doll is nothing to us. Here!” and in a moment he had stripped from Mignon her crown, her necklace, and her dress embroidered with pearls and jewels.

Rip, rip! Tear, tear! Ah, Mignon was only a poor little beggar-doll now, all rags and tatters. Jacques tossed her into the lap of the Queen, and leaped upon Black Bête, in front of his brother robber. There was a snort, a start, a click of hoofs — and they were gone.



XIV

HOW MIGNON SAVED THE QUEEN

CLOTILDE heard their gallop growing fainter and fainter along the road towards the Black Wood. But there were other sounds growing louder every minute. The hoofs of horses were striking sparks from the flint stones over which she and the robbers had recently passed, and they meant help, help! Mignon was saved, and they were both soon to be taken home! How Clotilde's heart warmed at the anticipation.

But suddenly a dreadful thought came to her. It was very dark. What if the rescuers should pass them by in the blackness? The moon had gone under a cloud, and Clotilde lay helpless in the shadow beside the road, unable to move or cry out. If the riders did not stop, they two would have to lie here all night, and it was grow-

MIGNON SAVED THE QUEEN

ing chilly and damp. The forests were full of other evil things besides robbers, — wild beasts, wolves and bears and fierce boars with long white tusks. Even if she should not die of cold and exposure, these creatures would hardly spare her until morning. Poor Clotilde shivered and turned pale. This was indeed a rough night for a little Queen who had always been so well taken care of that till now she had scarcely known what fear was.

The sound of galloping hoofs came nearer and nearer. Clotilde caught sight of the foremost rider. He reached her — he passed without a sign. He had not seen. The second passed — the third. Oh, what should she do! Clotilde was in an agony. It was like a nightmare; — to see one's danger, but not to be able to move, when the slightest motion would drive it away.

Suddenly a thought came to Clotilde. Mignon! Could not the poor tattered doll perhaps save her? Even as the fourth horseman passed, while the fifth and last was close upon her, a queer little voice rang out on the air.

“Mamma, Mamma, Mamma!” it cried, shrill and clear. Clotilde hoped she was not hurting

THE LONESOMEST DOLL

poor Mignon very much, but it was her only chance. Bound as she was she had managed to roll over a little, and was squeezing the doll flat upon the ground.

"Mamma, Mamma, *Mamma!*" The fifth cavalier reined up his horse with a jerk and cried "Whoa!" Could he believe his ears? He listened a moment. "Mamma, *Mamma, MAMMA!*" called Mignon again, at the top of her little bellows lungs.

With an exclamation of surprise the rider jumped down from his horse and began to look for the baby who was crying in the darkness. And then he soon came upon Clotilde, lying bound in the grass with her mouth tied in the robber's handkerchief.

"My faith!" he cried; "who is this?" and he stooped to examine the little figure. Then Clotilde saw his face: it was Raoul, her Captain of the Guards. In a minute he recognized her also, and fell upon his knees fumbling with the knots of the cords which bound her.

"My Queen!" he gasped. "Oh, I trust that your Majesty is not hurt? We have had such a fright—and such a hunt to find you." And he

MIGNON SAVED THE QUEEN

gave a shrill whistle to call back the other four horsemen, who had galloped beyond. So they all came clattering back, and with many exclamations leaped from their horses to assist Raoul in freeing the Queen from her bonds.

And then she told them the story of the robbers, at which they growled and hissed and stamped with rage, and were for setting out immediately to capture and punish Jean and Jacques, and to get back Mignon's jewels. But this the Queen forbade. "No," she said, "I am safe now, and so is my doll,—though her gems are gone. But I do not care for that. Take us home, Raoul. I am so tired. Let the wicked robbers go until another time."

"Until another time, then," said the five, reluctantly putting up their swords, and sighing with regret for the chase which they longed to begin. But they were so glad to have their little Queen safe and sound that they soon forgot everything else in the joy of carrying her back with them to the palace.



XV

THE RETURN HOME

THE foremost horseman was one whom Clotilde did not recognize, a big, burly fellow with a kind face, who wore his sword as if it were an article to which he was little used. When the others spoke to the Queen in congratulation and affectionate homage he alone was silent. But when they came to make ready to return, he knelt at her feet and begged a word with her. "Speak," said Clotilde, who was very weary and eager for home.

"Your Majesty, it was my little girl who brought all this trouble upon you," he said

THE RETURN HOME

humblly. "Nichette has told me everything, and I shall punish her to-morrow for stealing the keys,—and for all. If anything had happened to you,—oh, my Queen! What could I have done, how could I have borne it! Besides, it was fear of me which drove you away upon the wrong road. I have served you many years, though you know me not. Show me that you are not angry, that you forgive. Let me be the one to bear you home to safety, my Queen."

He did not look terrible to Clotilde now that she saw him there in the moonlight, though his voice was gruff and his boots were big.

"You are Pierre the Porter," she said. "I do know you. And you are Nichette's father; she is now my best friend. You must not punish Nichette. It was not her fault. It was my own foolishness which made me afraid. I love Nichette; if you will promise me not to punish her, Pierre, you shall take me home on your horse."

And so it was. Seated before him Clotilde the Queen rode back to her village. And Mignon, tattered and torn, was clasped tightly in her mother's arms all the way. For had she not

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saved the Queen's life, this brave and faithful little doll?

There was a crowd awaiting them at the town gate, for Captain Raoul had galloped ahead to tell the people the good news that the Queen was found and was coming back to them safe and sound. So Clotilde entered among cheers and hurrahs and the waving of torches, like a king returning from a victorious battle. In the front of the crowd, though it was long past her bedtime, was Nichette holding her mother's hand. Her little face was eager and anxious; but when she caught sight of Clotilde sitting in front of Pierre, with Mignon fast in her arms, a smile shone out like the sun after a shower.



THE RETURN HOME

She broke away from her mother's hand and ran up to her father's horse.

"O Clotilde! O Queen!" she gasped. "Are you really safe back again? You are not hurt through my fault? Oh, I am so glad!"

Clotilde made Pierre set her down from the horse, and the two children threw their arms about each other, sobbing with excitement. How the dignified uncles and aunts of Clotilde stared in disgust and surprise at such a sight! They had come to shake hands with their niece, and to congratulate her upon her safe return in quite the proper, courtly way. But she did not seem to see them nor to care about them at all. So they stood back, wondering what it all meant. This did not seem like the same cold, quiet little Queen whom they had last seen eating her dinner in the palace hall, surrounded by her stiff servants, and with nothing childish about her. Indeed, Clotilde would never again be quite the same. But this they were to discover later, little by little, as the days went by.

"Is Mignon safe?" whispered Nichette in the Queen's ear, while everybody stood staring at the two children. Clotilde nodded and held out

THE LONESOMEST DOLL

the doll for answer. But when Nichette saw the tattered dress and the crownless head of the lonesomest doll, she uttered a cry.

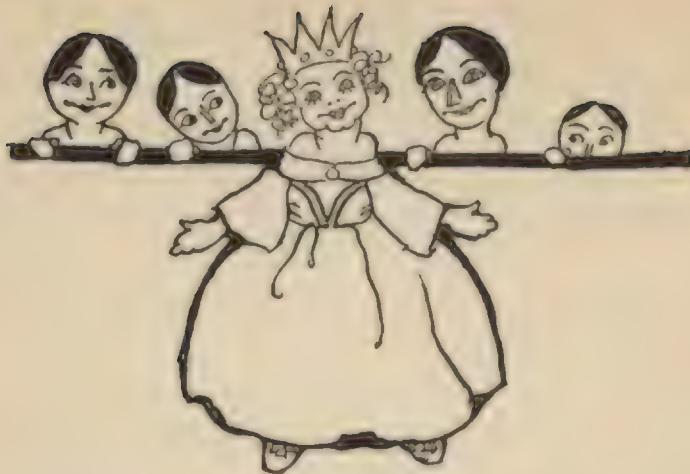
"Oh! what has happened to her pretty robe? Where are her jewels and her crown? She does not look like a queen any more. What does it mean?"

Clotilde looked down at her own torn and tumbled dress. "Still, she looks like me, Nichette, does she not?" she asked with a tired little smile. And in a whisper she added, "I am glad of it. She is now just a real little girl doll, not too grand to play with. I shall keep her so always, and she will not need to be shut up in a box any more—she is no longer the rich handsomest doll."

The Queen's chariot with four white horses was waiting to carry her back to the palace, and Clotilde made Nichette get in and ride with her. "For she is my best friend, is Nichette," she explained to the uncles and aunts who would have made some objection. But there was something new in the Queen's look and manner which made them all willing to let her have her way, though they peeped sideways at one an-

THE RETURN HOME

other and shook their heads when they found they were obliged to walk behind the chariot which held the Queen and the porter's daughter.



XVI

AND THEY LIVED HAPPILY EVER AFTER

MEANWHILE Clotilde had told Nichette all about what had happened that eventful night, — about the robbers, and Black Bête, and Jean's horse that stumbled by the road; and how Raoul and the others had found her, thanks to Mignon's cry of "Mamma, Mamma, Mamma!"

"And do you know, Nichette," said the Queen gravely, "you and Mignon and the robbers have been very good to me. You have taught me many things, and I shall never be the same stupid, proud, selfish little Doll-Queen shut up in my box of a palace. I have learned some-

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thing about the world outside, and in spite of the badness and the darkness,—I like it. I am going to be a part of it, a live little girl like you, Nichette. I shall play out of doors with you as often as I can. And you must let me share your dear father and mother, for they are best of all. I have nothing so good to share with you,—for it is I who have been the lonesomest Queen. But what I have shall be yours also, Nichette, from this night."

So they reached the palace gate, and Nichette bade her new little friend good-night. And a good night it was for the tired, happy Queen. For Mignon slept beside her on the pillow, and her dreams were all of pleasant things which were to happen thereafter in the garden where Nichette had her playhouse.

And the best of it all was that the dreams came true. For on the next day the Queen had a long talk with her uncles and aunts; and she told them that she wanted to be a real little girl and to live out among her people, so that she might grow up a strong, brave, noble queen who knew about the lives of those whom she was to rule. Of course they were very much

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shocked and surprised. But the Queen sent for Captain Raoul and for Pierre, whom she had made a Lieutenant, and asked them whether the army would not be on her side. And they said, "Yes, indeed!" The soldiers were all for their little Queen. That very day they were going out to find and punish Jean and Jacques for daring to interfere with her. For whatever she wished must be done in the kingdom, and it would go hard with *any one* who opposed her.

Then the uncles and aunts looked queerly at one another, and trembled. But they sent to look the matter up in the big book of the State Laws, where they found nothing to say that a queen should not have her will in the kingdom of her father and grandfather and great-grandfather. Moreover, you see, the army was on her side. So they were forced to agree that what she wanted she might do.

After that, with Raoul and Pierre to help her, there was no trouble. The Queen came and went from the palace to Pierre's home, where she played half the time at being a little cottage-girl like Nichette, with a real father and mother to love her.



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And Nichette spent half her time in the palace with the Queen, where she played at being a princess. They studied and sewed and practiced together; and on rainy mornings they had famous times in the big playroom with the shelves of toys. Nichette's dolls went also, and shared all the fun with Mignon,— no longer the lonesomest doll, but the happiest doll in the world, because her dear little Queen-mamma loved her so well.

But the nicest times were the sunshiny days when the two children and the five dolls played out under the rosebush in the Queen's garden. The paths were never swept nowadays, for the Queen loved to see the rose petals scattered all about and the grass long and lushy, so that one could almost hide under its cool greenness. Moreover, nowadays the fountain was always playing; and Nichette never tired of watching the great fish spout high into the air,— quite ten feet as Pierre had declared. And when the sundial showed that it was time, Clotilde would blow a little silver whistle, and a servant would bring their luncheon out under the rosebush, where they could picnic quite by them-

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selves, as on that happy day when they became acquainted.

So Clotilde, like Nichette herself, grew strong, fat, and rosy in the sunshine and the fresh air and the neighborhood of love. Her eyes were no longer sad, but sparkled like the rainbow drops on the edge of the fountain. For she knew that every one loved her more and more each day, and that there was nothing which her people would not do for her sake. And she hoped to grow up a wise, kind queen who would rule them in the very best way, so that her kingdom should become famous among Kings and Princes for its prosperity and peace. And the Wise Men knew that her hope was to be fulfilled.

"It is good to be a queen, nowadays," she would say, with her arm around Nichette's neck and with Mignon on her lap. And Mignon, in the tattered satin dress which the Queen loved best of all, because it reminded her of that exciting night, -- Mignon would say as the Queen hugged her tight, "Mamma, Mamma, Mamma!" while in her heart she thought, "It is good to be a queen's doll, nowadays. Oh, could I ever really have been the lonesomest doll?"

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But if she had not been the Lonesomest Doll, once upon a time, all these things would not have happened, and there would have been no story to tell.

THE END



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